

Time and Entropy

Unlike some of our other books, this one does not have an outline associated with it. Its author is writing it as they go. We don't love the title, so it might change at some point before completion, but it's still too early in the writing process to make that decision.

This book is told entirely from a non-human perspective, so expect lots of non-standard social and spiritual ideas when reading it.

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Chapter One

The end has come. Will be coming. Came long ago. Who can tell? Perhaps I could have at one point. In the future. In this moment.

What does it matter anyway? Time is an arbitrary construct, one that we use to make sense of our lives... I think.

No, that seems wrong. What is 'time' again?

I try to warn my scion of the coming disaster, but they laugh it off. Can't they see...? Or has that happened yet?

No, no. They're telling me I was right and that they should have listened... They're looking at me with such pity in their eyes that it wounds me.

Don't they see? Or have they seen?

Why, why, why-?

//4526.08.03-09:46 hour of the sun// Host, designation Serinius, has called on me again, and I have emerged.

A roomful of bereft ones—a class, I believe host calls it—is staring at them as they babble, speaking the flow of time aloud in an inappropriately disjointed manner. I do not understand why this group looks so confused. Surely some among them are strong enough to have pieced together the string of events that host is unwisely sharing.

...I should probably stop them.//

Something calls to me in a voice I should recognize. Do I, though? It's as familiar as my own, or perhaps it's a stranger's.

That can't be right.

A wispy creature of light coils through the air around me, plopping to a seat in front of my face. It slowly wags its bushy tail with its triangular ears dropping from the tilt of its head. Its form inflates with that same voice screaming at me to *run!*

It calmly tells me to listen, practically seething with annoyance.

It seeps from the heart of me while I choke on a scream

DO NOT TAKE HER FROM ME! PLEASE!

//4526.08.03-09:56 hour of the sun// *I have tried to quiet host, but something has gone wrong. They are screaming at their class, long and loud, and I fear this might be another instance where they end up in recovery for a day*

Watching them plaster themselves against the wall with its displayed mirage cutting through their body, I wince. AT LEAST one day.//

Reality explodes, expanding from a single point too quickly, *too slowly*, for me to keep track of it.

Life, not yet sentient, crawls from the sea of its brethren.

Life, *heat*, dies as chaos takes its place on its throne.

All hail entropy! Long may it reign!

A primitive mammal learns how to fold reality, making our starfarers obsolete. The Leachers come, taking all of our energy with them, and look at what they leave in its place!

Two holes in the timeline. The twining of the *adraste* with our psyches. The destruction of our society. The premature death of our galaxy.

Why can't anyone else see it? The end is coming!

//4526.08.03-10:01 hour of the sun// *The door to host's left slaps open, letting several replete ones with my brethren trailing them spill inside. Host clicks their teeth together, setting into an attack form as they jerk toward the disturbance.*

The replete ones are lucky. Host's unintentional call on me and my subsequent emergence have thoroughly distracted them, which gives their 'enemy' the chance to throw a handful of timelock grenades their way.

Such a short time spent outside with this summoning...

Oh, well. Time to integrate once more.//

As I fall to my knees, several hundred versions of people in the peacekeeper uniform converge into only a few of them. What on-?

My classroom resolved into a clear picture with my students staring at me, and *Aedeeka* was floating in front of my face.

"Oh... *hell*," I said, even as I reached for my *adraste*.

Please, please, please say I could touch her again before...

Her wispy beat form funneled into a stream of white light that flowed toward the heart of me, and as she dissolved into my flesh, the sear of it knocked me sideways with drool leaking out of my

mouth.

Thank fate for the peacekeepers. As they hurried forward with a sedative, I blessed them, even as I cursed them for needing their blasted drugs in the first place.

As my consciousness slipped toward black, I hurriedly catalogued everything I'd learned during this slip. There had been something important in it. What had it been?

Oh, yes. The end was coming.

A weak chuckle chased me into dreams. Of *course* it was.

Chapter Two

The quiet murmur of voices woke me up. I couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but considering how many times I'd been in this position, I could guess their words.

"Rousing them is a mistake," one would be saying. "We should leave them in suspension until their time is gone."

If I was lucky, someone would reply, "How can you suggest such a thing after everything they've been through? It would be the definition of cruelty!"

But most of the time, the response went more like this:

"We might still need them. Let's not make them angry unless we must."

While I waited for them to figure out that I'd regained consciousness, I struggled to place when this moment lay on my timeline. I thought I was experiencing 'now' instead of 'then', but properly ordering events in the forward flow of time was always difficult after a slip.

Not unmanageable! I'd done it often enough that it would soon come naturally to me once more, but an initial placement did take effort.

I was on the tail end of this when rings rattled along a pole, probably due to my guests drawing a hospital curtain back, and footsteps approached me, which meant I needed to decide. Did I want to freak them the hell out, risking an alteration to my timeline, or should I wait for them to speak? All of which boiled down to one question. What would I normally do?

Fate, having to live these moments one at a time was disorienting.

"You might want to close the curtain," I said. "We wouldn't want Medic Clairmont, soon to come around the corner, knowing I'm here, would we?"

After a pause, someone started cursing, which made me smile. Unnerving them was always *ever* so satisfying.

Again, a rattle rang in the air, and I opened my eyes, fighting to hide my wince. As expected, spectral variants were shimmering around my guests, something that set a dull ache pulsing in my head. I ignored them as best I could, not that I really needed to do that. They'd fade soon enough.

Avoiding my eyes, my guests got settled in the chairs around my hospital bed, but no one spoke once they'd made themselves comfortable. Guess I'd start, then.

"Greetings to the Curators, most especially the honorable Liaison Veshtra among them," I said. "I'd say hello more properly but..."

Lifting my hands, I clinked my padded cuffs against the side rails I was bound to.

"I'm sorry, Serinius," Veshtra said with tears filling their eyes, "but we have a situation that requires a Sage, and you've been chosen."

No, that wasn't right. Those words belonged to 'then', the time immediately after the Curators had bound *Aedeeka* to me.

Damn. I hated it when my circumstances forced me to show them a weakness.

"Repeat that, please," I said through gritted teeth.

The three people around me relaxed, clearly happy to be in a more comfortable setting, and I ignored how much this burned me. The centermost of them, Veshtra, coldly smiled while running a hand over the incorporeal form of their *adraste*, nestled in their lap. What a stark contrast they'd become to their earlier self.

"I asked what happened this time," they said. "When you slipped three months ago, you assured me you had it under control."

Raising an eyebrow, I said, "I'm sorry. Am I forgetting the part where I caused anything but a minor disturbance in the last day? Because if not, I'm unsure why you're questioning me about *control*."

Sneering that last part, I rolled my eyes, but if my derision affected Veshtra, they didn't show it, mildly gazing at me as they continued stroking the beast of light in their lap.

"Yes, peacekeepers were close enough to intervene before you could hurt anyone, but that doesn't mean you wouldn't have, given time," they said. "You must see why I'm concerned."

Honestly? I did.

Given how I'd been acting in recent years and how previous Sages had typically ended their careers, it should be clear to anyone looking that I was approaching that same breaking point.

I couldn't voice that doubt, though.

"No, I don't," I said, "and since I'm obviously in control now, I have to wonder why I'm still restrained. Unless you've come to decommission me?"

Fate say they hadn't. I had to last as long as I could, delaying the passing of my burden for as long as possible. As far as I knew, we hadn't reached that point in my timeline. My scion had yet to join my class, after all.

"Don't tempt me," Veshtra said. "After all the problems you've caused, I'm having trouble with justifying how the benefits you've brought us outweigh the damage you've caused."

I had nothing to say to that. Veshtra and I'd had this conversation so many times before, and because of that, we both knew it was reaching its end. Even with their limited grasp on the timeline, they'd always had things like this, one of the few points concerning time where we were equal.

After a moment, they sighed, jerking their head at one of the people beside them, and the aide withdrew a key from their pocket. As they leaned forward, their *adraste* scurried down their arm, intently pointing its beady eyes at me, and they froze. The *adraste* sniffed the air, lifting its pointed nose, before abruptly returning up its host's arm. Slowly breathing out, the one who claimed it lowered their tensed shoulders.

It was too bad. They were rather pleasing to the eye. I'd have liked to bed them.

Rubbing my wrists, I said, "Is there anything else, or may I go?"

Veshtra turned aside before flicking their fingers at me, and I briefly considered causing an unnecessary advance of entropy to get away from them more quickly. It seemed like such a waste, though, considering how much heat I'd need to safely reach home.

"Well, then," I said. "A pleasure, as always."

Swinging my legs over the side of the hospital bed, I scooted between their chairs. I waited for the proper moment before ducking through the curtain. To my right, a medic took a step out of the space I'd soon occupy, intently focused on a chart, and as they moved on, none the wiser, I turned toward the closest exit from the ward, on my left.

As always when slipping through the cracks like this, the *adraste* were my primary source of concern. Most of the time, they caused me no trouble, attached to their hosts' timelines as they were, but the rare instances when they gained the ability to see all of time had fucked me over too often to ignore them.

They gave me no trouble today.

When I eventually stepped out of the hospital, I was walloped by the sudden upsurge of spectral variants floating around the people outside. This was to be expected, of course, given how many possibilities for an overall timeline change were wandering around me, but it froze me in place nonetheless, increasing the tempo of the pounding ache behind my eyes.

When I could, I once more oriented to 'now', glancing through the Aegis that preserved the city to this planet's failed seed. A little over-one-hundredth of an AU from where I stood, the long-dead corpse of a star still radiated the remnant heat of its life into the void, and measuring that against what I'd observe of it many times along my timeline, I quickly established when I was.

With that done, I could focus on my location. Lesandra, in all of its majesty, was spread before me. As always, the Curators had taken me to a hospital near the city's apex, and from there, I could see the stark line where the Aegis separated life from the freeze. Between me and it, the many jagged outlines of the city's skyscrapers, both narrow and wide, blocked sight of the ground *far* below. Their rooftops made a steady downward slope until all signs of civilization ended.

In between these buildings, the thick cables of transport lines hung at a slant, fanning out from where I was standing, while enclosed walkways made perpendicular paths at all levels.

While I waited for the spectral variants around me to fade, I watched a cargo crate zip down a cable from one of the factories found below this layer of administration.

I'd always admired the Curators' resourcefulness, an example of which was rapidly falling out of sight. Using potential energy to move goods around the city instead of relying on heat, like my people did, was genius, even if it didn't eliminate the need for thermal energy throughout the process. *Something* had to get supplies up this high before the end product could go zipping back down.

Still, the way the Curators did this and other such things was more efficient overall than my people's system, and I could appreciate that.

A gust of wind roared around the hospital, and shivering, I raised the hood of my jacket. Was it colder in Lesandra than normal? If so, I should check the Aegis' control sometime soon. It might need another transfer of heat, which would be a tad concerning. How quickly had the Curators been burning through my last transfer to need another one eight months later?

Also, where the *hell* would I find the heat needed for it?

Shaking my head, I set off, quickly leaving the hospital behind.

One would think that in a population several million strong, at least one person would recognize their Sage in the time it took me to reach my destination, although... perhaps it wasn't so surprising. Sure, I could filter through the timelines of the people around me so that I was always where they weren't looking, but even without that, keeping myself unnoticed was easy. I'd been able to stride through a crowd, unseen, for decades now.

The only time I revealed my identity was when I approached the edge of the Aegis' protection, but that was because dealing with a single person's reaction to me would be easier than forcing an unauthorized exit into the freeze. As I ambled toward my chosen door, the person guarding it rocked to their feet, presenting me with their palm.

"Excuse me, individual, but you can't be here," they said. "Access to this area is restricted to the peacekeepers, Liaisons, and-"

"The Sage?" I said, lowering my hood.

After blinking for a moment, the guard rested their hand over their heart and bowed to me.

"An honor, vaunted one," they said. "Meeting you has been a lifelong wish."

"Oh, I'm aware. Why do you think I chose to use this door out of the many available to me?" I said. "Please. You should relax."

Reluctantly, the guard straightened, flexing their hand once it was at their side once more, but that was the only sign they gave of any anxiety they might be feeling.

"Are you going home, vaunted one?" they asked.

Oo. I liked this one. Usually, it took much longer to get through the awe and formality part of conversations like this.

"I am," I said. "Would you open the door for me?"

"Of course."

With a short bow, the guard hurried to the door's controls, and cocking my head at their retreating back, I considered whether I should give in to temptation when it came to this solitary being. They were insignificant in the grand scheme of things. What possible harm could there be in perusing their timeline more thoroughly?

But as soon as I'd done it, I bit back a hiss, looking away. Looking anywhere but at the guard.

"When you're ready, Sage Serinius," they eventually called. "The door is open."

After taking a couple of quick breaths, I plastered a smile in place before heading into the distended bulge now sticking off of the Aegis. The ground crunched as I stopped within it while the ice I'd stepped on gradually melted beneath my boots.

Another pair of breaths preceded me turning to the guard.

"Thank you, Tanika," I said. "Your service has been noted."

As their eyes widened with joy warming them, I blinked back the tears in mine, unable to wipe away the image of a hole, soon to be bored through their forehead. The one I'd so recently beheld. It would be *so easy* to tell them what was coming, imparting a warning that would save their life, but if I did that...

Fate. Who knew what else I might change? Most of the time, it was best not to mess with time, letting it play out as it should.

"Honored to have served," the guard said.

They hurried back to the door's controls, and I forced thoughts of them away so I could find a source of heat to steal from. While I could easily take some from the air around me, it would be inefficient, forcing me to suck heat from a much greater perimeter than I'd like.

No. The best sources of heat were anything that involved combustion and if that wasn't an option...

Not far from here, a rodent had hidden a nest among a pile of debris. It and several smaller forms—its progeny most likely—were sleeping there.

"Sorry, little ones," I said. "Wrong place, wrong time."

With a thought and the twitch of my hand, I switched the level of entropy found in my location with what lay in the animals, and a wash of heat spilled over my skin, leaving tiny, rodent-sized icicles behind. Now that I'd lowered the entropy level around me, garnering myself an additional layer of warmth as a side effect, I only needed to hold it steady, or as steady as I could, until I reached home.

Because while I'd said that I'd 'lowered' entropy, I hadn't. Not really. I'd only shifted it around on the micro scale while also advancing it on the cosmic level. The lack of thermal energy to do mechanical work was part of what entropy was, after all, and *that*, especially in our part of the universe, was always increasing, a descent into randomness that loomed over every *feralae's* head.

Tanika, the guard, had cocked their head inquisitively at me, and I nodded. It was time to leave Lesandra behind.

In front of me, the side of the bulge I occupied started pinching off, and making sure I still had Tanika's attention, I laid a hand over my heart and bowed, although I also held their gaze. Flushing, they drew a breath to speak, but my bulge from the Aegis had pinched off, preventing sound from reaching me. With a smile, I maintained my pose until the bulge around me had dissipated, exposing me to the freeze.

Then, I put my back to the Curators, their city, and their skewed sense of time.

As I trudged toward home, I fought to remember how my people... how *I* should view time. This effort was made difficult by the observations that my brain kept making about my surroundings.

Like how the snowfall must have been light in recent days to make my trek today so easy. Or how the crumbling ruins of long-abandoned villages was a testament to the *feralae's* will to live.

Hundreds of years had passed since the Leachers had stolen the life of our stars, and still, we fought to survive.

It was the opposite of the problem I'd had in the hospital. There I'd muddled through placing events in the 'then', 'now', and 'yet to come'. Here, I had to constantly remind myself that concepts like 'now' and 'then' were arbitrary. Irrelevant.

Time was time. It could not be put in order.

But because of who I was, who the Curators had made me, I could no longer see it that way. I could come close, but my once natural state was always just out of reach, only fully achieved when I called on *Aedeeka*. I couldn't to that so soon after I'd slipped, no matter how tempting I found it.

This was me, someone stuck between worlds. Ever, I was tugged between the two versions of the *feralae*, never belonging. Never at home. I was outside of it all, and oh, how I wanted this to end. To call on *Aedeeka*, touch her, and force the Curators to decommission me.

And yet, I also dreaded the day that would happen because that was the day my scion would be chosen, and I didn't want to pass this mantle off onto another person.

In the distance, another Aegis, much smaller than the one containing Lesandra's heat, appeared, and I quickened my pace.

I was ready to reach home. A cup of liquidized stimulant waited for me there, and after I'd enjoyed a few sips of it, I could finish grading my class's papers, although... I'd have to retrieve those first. I doubted the peacekeepers who'd restrained me had been kind enough to take them to my home.

When I reached Celuk's Aegis, I force my way through it, hoping to avoid my people for now. I was nowhere near the mindset I'd need while here, which wasn't a surprise given my forced visit with the Curators. I didn't need a reminder of what I should be like right now.

Covertly moving through Celuk was much more difficult than it had been in Lesandra. Besides the occasional Liaison, the people here didn't have *adraste* forcibly ordering their sense of time, so I must rely on mundane skills to sneak through the village. That and the sparseness of Celuk with only huts in the way of buildings made moving through it *annoying*. I managed to successfully do it maybe one in three of the times I tried.

Today was one of those times. As I reached the doorway to my classroom, I felt my shoulders lowering from my ears, but as soon as I rounded the corner, they shot back up.

My classroom looked the same as before I'd called on *Aedeeka*. The mirage at the front was still displaying a diagram that explained ancient farming techniques, and a mix of papers and tablets had been left on the desks between. The peacekeepers must have ushered my students home after restraining me.

This didn't cause concern, familiar as the scene was. What I hadn't expected was the person slowly spinning in the center of the room with their fingers on their lips. Their copper hair fell to the neckline of their top, contrasted by the lighter than normal shade of their gray skin, and the leggings under their translucent wrap outlined a well-defined figure.

A figure I knew.

Here, now, when I'd least expected it, my scion had appeared in my life, exactly as I'd seen it so many years before, and I wanted to run from this place and pretend I'd never seen them.

Instead, I squeaked, silently cursing myself for the noise as they spun toward me. Their solid black eyes widened as a brilliant smile completed the lovely picture of their face, and as their lips parted, I internally groaned, knowing what would come next.

'Sage Serinius! Hi, there. I've joined your class.'

How many times had I replayed those words after figuring out who they were to me? They were words that heralded the end to a wonderful person's happy life.

So, I cringed as my scion opened their mouth and said.

"Hello, beloved."

Chapter Three

Hello, beloved? That... that was *not* what my scion was supposed to say. They were *not* supposed to softly smile at me while I gaped back, and they were *definitely not* supposed to come forward and gently take hold of my face.

With their eyes fluttering closed, they said, "Mm. Even if this touch is always available to me, it's good to feel it in full. Don't you agree, Serinius?"

Grabbing this person's wrists, I pried their hands off of my skin before backing away.

Not much scared me anymore. The ability to shift the galaxy's level of entropy around while also having a singular control on my view of time had given me too much power, enough that very little could threaten my life.

Someone acting outside of their timeline's established parameters was one of the few things that still *scared the shit* out of me because it always heralded coming chaos or... I could be nearing the end of my timeline. But that wasn't much of a comfort either.

So, I walked away. It wasn't wise to ignore an anomaly of time like this, but I. just. *couldn't*. I'd endured so much struggle and strife and suffering in my time as the Sage, had so much happiness taken away, and I couldn't make those sacrifices again. Not anymore.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised that my scion kept pace with me, humming under their breath. Several times, I tried to escape or otherwise break their sure stride at my side, but nothing I did worked.

They didn't comment on my newfound helplessness, which I was grateful for. It was helping me keep my agitation under control.

My scion accompanied me all the way home, ignoring the people around us as they paused and subsequently scattered. Only once we'd reached my destination did my scion diverge from my path, stopping short instead of continuing on.

Knowing I'd regret it, I turned toward them, curious what had brought on the change. They reached behind their back to pull a stack of papers out of their waistband before offering it to me.

"What you wanted," they said.

Hesitantly, I took my students' papers, the ones I needed to grade, from my scion, and they clutched their hands behind their back, beaming at me.

"My name's Eradnee, by the way," they said. "I know it's hard for you to know all of the timeline or at least, all of it at once. It's ok, beloved. I can do that for us. I can wait for you to lose yourself to me."

Stepping up to me, they cupped my face before rising to their tiptoes and kissing my cheek. I was frozen by this, stuck in place until they'd strolled out of view, but then, I entered my home in a haze.

They were here. How long had I known about the moment of our meeting, reliving it so often that at times, it had been like it had already and was currently happening? Yet even still, I'd missed some details, besides the obvious. Like...

Fate! They were so *young!* Sure, I'd been around the same age when the Curators had bound *Aedeeka* to me, maybe a little younger, but... shit.

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head while latching the door behind me. The papers got dropped onto a nearby side table along with my jacket, once I'd shrugged out of it.

I couldn't think about this. It needed to settle in my mind until my thoughts had stopped spinning so fiercely, but once that had happened, I needed to sit down and scour my timeline once again. Maybe I could figure out when and how time had jumped its track enough to cause the discrepancies I'd experienced.

To hurry this along, I wandered into my kitchen. A cup of stimulant was calling my name.

I was grateful for the need to crank and squeeze that liquid through its strainer, as one must in Celuk. With the Curators in Lesandra, the process was automated, but not here. The burn of this physical work chased away the lingering chill that I'd gained on my journey home and during my encounter with my scion.

But I *wasn't* thinking about that.

Once I was finished, I flopped into one of the chairs around my small table. Behind me, the weak light of this planet's star streamed through a window, diffusing until it had stippled my paper stack. Prepared for a good bit of reading, I leaned over the first of the papers.

My class covered the time of the Leachers and the Sages' origin. Every year, I had my students do a research project, one that lasted throughout the class's length, and at its completion, each student presented me with a scenario that might have kept the *feralae* from experiencing a slow extinction.

While this project was incredibly useful for putting *feralae* history into perspective for the young, my class was mostly used as a tool to, in a roundabout way, teach my people about time in the way the Curators saw it.

I taught it because I had a foot in both worlds. If a Curator took my place, they'd have no clue how to begin with my students, and my people, being the students, didn't have the understanding

necessary for my role, not even after they'd completed the class.

It was another way that the Sage was pushed to the outskirts, but perhaps that was for the best. I couldn't be disappointed by my attempts to integrate with the *feralae* if I was never given the chance to make them.

Hell, I was acting maudlin tonight.

Pushing the papers aside, I sipped my stimulant, watching the outline of the window on the table move away from me. Soon, I could get ready for bed and lose myself to dreams, but before that could happen, I had to do something I'd rather not attempt.

Had my thoughts stilled enough for me to begin? I no longer felt as if a gong had gone off in the world, reverberating through me until it had knocked my stream of consciousness loose. That was a good start.

Slowly breathing out, I set my mug on the table, flattening my hands on its surface. In the most gradual of increments, I reached deep inside, seeking *Aedeeka*. I couldn't do this quickly. If I did, we might get a repeat of earlier with me seeing all of time at once. I lost myself when that happened, and when combined with my other skills as the Sage, it could be devastating and at times, deadly for the people around me.

Soon enough, I found my *adraste*, and taking a deep breath, I plunged forward.

My life expanded before me, an explosion of events and words and actions. It was overwhelming, inundating me with information, but usually, I could handle it, identifying what I needed before too long.

It was too much for me today. Two heartbeats dragged by in the outside world, and I could no longer contain the scream building in my chest. It burst from me, rubbing my throat raw while I collapsed on the table, and I knew I hadn't given myself enough time to prepare for this.

Scenes popped like the start of a combustion before my eyes.

I slide a blade into my target, weeping as they breathe their last. It's my first kill.

Rapture washes through me as my partner and I come to completion. They're my first love.

I brush my lips over a kid's forehead, nodding to their parent once I'm finished, and they're taken away. They're the first of my offspring.

Resin slows in its drip from the gaping wound in my side, and the cold, ever my enemy, comes to claim its victory. It's my first death.

Or my last one. Telling the difference had been getting difficult for me lately.

Desperate, I cast out for the one piece of my timeline that I knew like the back of my hand, and my classroom rushed into focus. My scion scanned it with a wistful smile, turning to me after I'd alerted them to my presence.

And with widening eyes, they said...

"Hello, beloved."

Jerking upright, I yanked free of *Aedeeka's* influence with one question circling in my head—

What? What? What?

—but before I could escape, a last bit of the scene popped into my awareness.

My scion comes forward to cradle my face, and their eyes flutter closed. They're my last love. My *greatest* love.

And air burned me as I sucked it into my lungs.

"*WHAT?*" I shrieked.

Oh... oh, no. I couldn't...

Had I finally lost my mind? Had what I'd originally known about that meeting never existed on my timeline?

And greatest love?

Slowly shaking my head, I muttered, "No..."

They were my *scion*. Eventually, they would replace me, and it would be my fault that they must occupy my role. Not only that but I'd sworn years ago that I would never trust my heart to another *feralae*. So, love?

"No," I said. "No, no, no."

Getting to my feet, I scrubbed my hands along my scalp before shaking myself. Maybe fatigue had interfered with my dive into my timeline. Things of that nature had certainly messed with me like this in the past. So... bed?

"Yes," I said. "I should get some sleep."

Even with the decision made, it took me a while to clean up my spilled cup of stimulant and get ready for bed. Throughout the process, my hands wouldn't stop shaking, but eventually, my head hit a pillow, and I forced myself to relax.

No more thinking about what had happened today. I could deal with the implications of it tomorrow.

Everything would be better in the morning.

Chapter Four

//4526.08.05-02:36 hour of the sun// *Why have I been called on again? This is too soon after the last...*

Oh.//

I wake to the end, unfolding all around me. Fate, the cold of it... it takes root in my core, slowing me down as I leap... or stumble to my feet.

Around me, the stars go out with entropy taking a firm hold, and I... I can't stop it, no matter what my timeline might once have said.

Still, I had to try. I tottered on unsteady feet through a door and down the dimly lit hall outside.

I was on a ship; I thought. One of the starfarers that had come before my people had learned to create Gateways. This should concern me, shouldn't it? The means to travel between the stars had been in storage for.. for...

A bright light flares around the hatch ahead, and I weave toward it.

//4526.08.05-02:45 hour of the sun// *Oh, this is bad. Host... Serinius has drunkenly stumbled into a populated area, teetering in place as they stare. If the bereft ones around us know what is best for them, they will avoid Serinius until the replete ones arrive, but that will never happen. Time's course is set, and everyone here knows what comes next.*//

I'm here again, floating in the void, with nothing around me, not even stars, not even...

Someone important should be with me now. Right? They keep me on track for this last part, giving me purpose.

Who are they? *Where* are they?

Something moved in the void around me, and I go still. That isn't right.

Or is it? Time was no longer behaving as it should, refusing to follow my timeline's familiar course for... oh, I don't know how long it'll have been now.

If something's in the void with me, what could it be? Nothing survives here, nothing but- but me, I supposed.

And the Leachers. Long ago, they had the ability to travel between the stars without the protection of starfarers to sustain them.

Again, something moved nearby, and I have to wonder. Have I run into them, the *feralae*'s most ancient enemy? I remember something about encountering them at the end of my timeline. Possibly.

Fate, why is it so hard to think? Where- where-?

Screaming, long and loud, I pressed my hands to my skull.

"Eradnee!" I shouted. "Beloved, *where are you?*"

Shadowed monsters materialized in the void, speaking garbled noise. They reach for me, trying to hold me still, but I won't let them touch me.

I moved.

//4526.08.04-02:58 hour of the sun// I watch, helpless, as Serinius snaps the neck of the bereft one who's come to help them. Roaring, they charge the others, gathered on all sides, and that group stands still, putting up no resistance as Serinius begins their slaughter.

This... is my fault. I should have seen it coming, should have warned someone—ha! Like that is possible—should have resisted Serinius' call earlier, should have...

Should have, would have, could have. I cannot change what is happening, cannot stop the beginning of host's final unraveling. I can only stay at their side and bear witness.//

They wouldn't stop coming! And they... they were *everywhere!*

Nowhere is safe, nothing set to save me. This is it, isn't it? The end of my timeline. The passing of the mantle. The time when I...

"NO!" I roared.

I have to keep going. It didn't matter how many forms stepped out of the void around me. I will eliminate the threat because I can't let it go. I can't let Eradnee-

"Serinius. That's enough."

Their voice will pull me up short, leaving me stretching hungry fingers for another shadowed monster. I have to make it vanish, had to- to *end the threat!*

"There's no threat here, beloved. All that's left is you, me, *Aedeeka*, and a sole survivor."

Survivor of *what?* The shadowed forms that had stopped rising on all sides? The Leachers, come to escort entropy up the final steps to its throne?

"A sole survivor of *you*, Serinius. Stop this now. See when you are. *Aedeeka*, my friend, my foe? Stop acting like you can't do anything. You don't need the Curators' help to return to where you

should be."

Aedeeka. My *adraste*.

My scion was speaking to her? Why? *Aedeeka* couldn't hear or understand us. The only times I could communicate with her were when I touched her.

Fate, I want to touch her.

"Then, do it."

But where... where...?

White light in the shape of a small, four-legged creature drifts in front of me. The animal plops to a seat with its bushy tail and pointed ears drooping. Why does it seem so sad?

When I stretch a finger toward it, though, it perks up. It reaches out with its nose, and we *connect*.

And I screamed.

Usually, when I touched my *adraste*, I merged with her, returning to what I'd once been. Time was no longer a concern for me, and everything *wrong* about me, everything that was missing, healed.

Something new accompanied the sensation this time. A stream of voices, all of them crying out in frustration or pain or fear, funneled into my head, and there, they pooled with nowhere to go. I picked out strands from this mess as best I could, but they were fragmented, choppy, disconnected.

"Don't do it! Not aga-!"

"You can't leave-"

"-please! I love-"

And behind it all was my voice, ragged. Reedy.

And theirs.

"I know. It hurts, my beloved. You'll get through this, though, and finally, *finally*, our journey will begin."

It was the last thing I heard before *Aedeeka* channeled into me, toppling my already shaky wobble. Twitching on the ground, I fought through the pain so I could see my surroundings. I frowned at the limp bodies lying around me, but then, I was gone.

Chapter Five

The door hissed open behind me, but I didn't check who'd entered. Why should I?

I'd been here for two weeks. Two weeks since I'd woken up and the Curators had told me what had happened. They were right to keep me confined.

But to this point, they'd been... kind enough to respect my wish for isolation. Except for when someone brought me food, no one came into this room, too busy figuring out what to do with the mess I'd caused to linger.

Given that, why was my current guest still here?

"If you've come to gawk, I wouldn't blame you for it, but I'd also advise against it," I said. "Staying so close to a shattered Sage is hazardous for one's health."

"You'd never hurt me. Not in any timeline I've seen, at least."

My view of Lesandra, seen through a window, blurred as I whirled in place. Standing between me and an open doorway, my scion had their hands clasped in front of their hips and an uncertain smile on their lips.

"*What are you doing here?*" I hissed.

With their lips twitching, Eradnee said, "Don't you know?"

I did. That skintight jumpsuit with its weirdly textured material and the hair shaved from their temples meant only one thing.

Numbly, I reached out, seeking a nearby chair. When I found one, I heavily dropped into it before burying my face in my hands.

"No," I breathed into them.

"You don't agree with the decision?"

I barked a broken laugh, loud to me but probably muffled for them.

"How could I not?" I said. "You're the last piece needed before the end begins, seen so many times by me that I can't deny it. How I wish that I could."

My scion's feet tapped across the floor. They sank in front of me, pulling my hands off of my face. With pinched lips and a face creased with earnestness, they stared at me for a moment before opening and closing their mouth.

"What?" I said.

Damn, I hadn't sounded that hollow in a while, but then, it matched my state right now. Everything about me had been dug out, everything but the faintest ghost of the person I'd once been, and that was unacceptable.

I might be a shattered Sage, but I still had a final duty to perform, no matter how protracted it might be. I had to get myself together.

But I couldn't.

"This is what I never understood, no matter how often I've experienced it," Eradnee said, lightly resting their hand on my knee. "After all the horrible things that have happened in your life, both the crimes committed by you and against you, why does this—"

They gestured at their jumpsuit.

"—affect you so much?"

I looked away because how was I supposed to answer them? Whatever I said, they wouldn't understand, not now and hopefully not for a long while yet.

Warm skin caressed my cheek, nudging me forward again, and once I'd met Eradnee's eyes, they brushed a thumb under one of mine.

"Tell me. Please."

Fate. Suddenly, I *had* to explain.

"I know what I am. I know what I've done," I said. "If I had a choice in the matter, I would never pass this burden off onto another innocent *feralae*. No one should be me."

Something filled Eradnee's gaze—sadness maybe?—and they slowly breathed out with a nod.

"Ok."

Rising from their crouch, they offered me a hand.

"The ascension procedure will start soon," they said. "Will you come with me? I could use a friendly face today."

I snorted. A friendly face? *Me?*

But I took their hand.

I didn't know how they did it, but as we wandered down the halls at Lesandra's pinnacle, Eradnee kept us out of everyone's line of sight. Already, they performed as a proper Sage should, and it broke my heart.

Eventually, however, they couldn't keep it up. We approached a door guarded by two peacekeepers, and when they saw us coming, they did a double take before reaching for their weapons.

"Don't bother. You'd never touch us," Eradnee called. "Besides, I've asked Sage Serinius to stand as my witness today."

They'd *what now?*

The peacekeepers stayed tense for a moment before slowly relaxing.

"All honor to you, vaunted ones," one of them said.

They bowed as we passed between them.

Once we were out of the peacekeepers' hearing range, I hissed, "You want me to be your *witness?*"

Never looking at me, Eradnee nodded.

"I'm sorry. I know you never wanted this," they said, "but I can't look to your desires alone, beloved. I have needs too, and one of them is for you to be at my side while they destroy this version of me."

Well did I remember my ascension to the position of Sage. Well did I remember my need for someone 'safe' at my side. How I'd screamed when what I'd needed hadn't been there!

"Of course I'll be your witness, then," I said. "*Of course.*"

Stopping, I turned them to face me.

"Eradnee, what they'll do to you... I'm sorry for it."

Hanging their hand from my wrist, Eradnee showed me a twisted smile.

"I know," they said.

"I want you to know that I'll take care of you," I said. "For as long as I can, I'll keep you safe."

Their face fell.

"That's very sweet, and I will always love you for what you've offered," they said, "but if you do that, then I'll also never forgive you for it. If we're to maintain our timeline, you have to make me an unstoppable Sage, Serinius. You have to break me, destroying your soul in some ways, because if you don't, all *feralae* are doomed."

Something had lodged itself so immovably in my throat that I had to painfully clench my hold on Eradnee to relieve the pressure.

"I don't know if I can," I hoarsely said.

Again, Eradnee cupped my face, and I was half-tempted to nuzzle into their palm.

"You can," they said. "You will."

Trailing their hand down my neck and arm, they intertwined our fingers, and we moved on.

When we eventually reached the staging room, I stopped short, fighting to take a step forward, and at my side, Eradnee patiently waited for my struggle to resolve. I didn't know if I could do this. I didn't *want* to do this.

I had to do this.

It hurt my soul to walk through that cursed door, but I made myself take those awful steps anyway. Inside, we found everything arranged exactly the way it had been 'then'. Or- or was it 'now'?

Fate, I *could not* lose my hold on time right now but- but-

I took in the bright, surgical lights lining the ceiling, glaring down on the black cushions of a reclined chair. I hyper-fixated on the metal beams peeking through those cushions and the restraints secured to each of them.

And I surged backward, caught by the peacekeepers behind me.

And I froze, caught in the realization of everything the Curators intended for me.

And I was dragged, kicking and screaming, to a place I'd never willingly go.

And I recognized the futility of fighting, gliding serenely to the site of my execution.

And it didn't matter whether I'd win or lose. I'd make this farce as difficult for the fucking Curators as I could. I would make it obvious how much I didn't want to submit.

And Eradnee slipped their hand into mine, curling their fingers against the back of it.

"Breathe, beloved," they said. "This moment is mine, not yours."

That was right. I was here as a witness, not a victim. This was 'now', not 'then'.

And I'd already been destroyed.

At my nod, Eradnee calmly took their place, taking a moment to get settled before beckoning to me. I moved forward with reluctance clinging to my every motion, but soon enough, I was at their side. Smiling, Eradnee unfurled their fingers. I took the prompt for what it was. I gave them warmth and reassurance and as much kindness as I could spare as the restraints tightened around their limbs.

A Curator came into the staging room once Eradnee had been secured. With their head held high Liaison Veshtra kept the hexagonal container in their hands at chest level, as if to proudly display its contents to the world. Through the glass in its sides, I glimpsed a fuzzy, white pinprick, secured in the center by many glowing lines, and I wanted to throw up.

Much as I might always long for *Aedeeka* with every fiber of my being, much as the *adraste* had become such a central pillar in *feralae* society, they also remained a lingering, final gift from the Leachers. The sight of one of their newly-born twisted me inside and out. As Veshtra placed the box in the holding space beneath Eradnee's head, it took far more effort than it should have to remain calm and still.

Eradnee merely smiled, squeezing their hold on my hand.

Fate. This was pure torture.

Once Veshtra had left the room, there were no fancy speeches. Maybe at one point, someone would have thanked Eradnee for their sacrifice, but as with everything else, that practice had changed. The Curators had grown complacent, expecting my people to provide a Sage for them without complaint. It was one more way they'd long since diverged from my own people.

This was the way of things now.

So, no words were spoken before wire-like tendrils stretched away from the container. They tentatively trailed up the chair's metal struts, reaching and seeking until they touched Eradnee's flesh.

My scion held perfectly still as those tendrils crawled over their body, which I couldn't help but admire. I struggled to bury an image of myself, thrashing to get away from the repulsive sensation, as the tendrils found their places at Eradnee's temples and each of their orifices.

They held my gaze as the tendrils dug their way inside, burrowing under their eyes and round their nostrils and into their mouths and...

Eradnee's breath caught for a moment, spreading a dead silence through the staging room, but once more, they smiled for me, imparting a final squeeze.

Then, a hiss replaced the silence while the white pinprick in the container faded to nothing. It traveled along its conducting tendrils, and Eradnee *screamed*.

My hand became a fist around their fingers. While their body arched off of the chair, I maintained my hold as if it were the only thing that mattered, throwing words at them in the hope that they would hear them.

"I'm here. I'm here. I'm here. I'm here."

I kept repeating those words, daring to believe that Eradnee would absorb the message behind them.

You are not alone. As long as I'm here, you will never be alone.

Finally, it was over. The tendrils retreated to an empty container, and with their body slowly relaxing, Eradnee focused their red and streaming eyes on me. They tried to speak, to put words to the loss I knew they were feeling, and I dropped to my knees at their side.

"I know," I whispered. "But it's over, and I've got you. You can rest, beloved, and when you wake up, we will get through this together."

A soft smile somehow carved through the remnants of agony still spread across Eradnee's face.

"Beloved?" they croaked.

But then, they were gone, slumping into sleep, and I was left with the wreckage that the Curators' precious ascension procedure had left behind.

Chapter Six

It took Eradnee weeks to recover, not that I'd expected anything else. A key piece of their psyche had been fundamentally altered. Of course they needed time to adjust.

I'd spent my own convalescence period in isolation. Before me, the *feralae* had been coasting on the leftover residue of the last Sage's sacrifice for almost a decade. No one had known how to handle what I'd become.

So, I'd spent months alone, fumbling to fit *myself* into the new framework of my thinking. I didn't make contact with *Aedeeka* until the end of that time period, the sign that the Curators had been waiting for to pull me out of convalescence.

It would have been nice if they'd told me about that at any point over those lonely two months.

I had no intention of letting Eradnee experience that discomfort. So, as they wandered aimlessly around their new apartment, I trailed in their wake. I was always one breath away from giving them whatever they needed, even if what they needed at times was simply space.

Yes, they'd told me that I should fight my undeniable desire to keep them safe. I understood this more than they could know.

But what they were going through right now? It wasn't some danger, come to put them in peril. It was trauma, plain and simple. Something that would only hinder their development into their own Sage. And I knew *exactly* how to help with that. Experience had taught me nothing less.

Companionship and care. I offered Eradnee as much togetherness as they desired, as often as I could do. It was the least I could do.

I was there when Eradnee stumbled onto the apartment's balcony, screaming their heart out to the void. I was there when they shook and wept, curled into as tight of a ball as they could manage. I was there when they sat in our star's dim light, blankly staring at Lesandra's vista through a window.

And I was there when they first contacted their *adraste*.

It took weeks, as I'd said, but when it happened, it was unmistakable. I was making Eradnee dinner on that fateful evening, letting a cup of stimulant steep while gruel slowly thickened in front of me. This might not be the most elegant of meals, but it would go down easily, something my scion had needed lately. I flavored it as best I could, keeping in mind which meals Eradnee had been picking at and which they'd devoured as I did. Just as I was transferring their food to an eating surface, a sharp gasp spiked into the air behind me.

Snapping my eyes closed, I set the gruel down and took a deep breath. After the weeks I'd spent here, I knew what Eradnee's pain, sorrow, and fear sounded like. That gasp had been unlike anything else I'd heard from them in this place. In fact, the tone of it had been distinctly similar to how they'd sounded on meeting me.

Happiness. They'd sounded happy.

And I knew what that meant.

I made myself turn around. Several paces away, Eradnee was sitting on the edge of their new couch, slack-mouthed and with wondering eyes. The misty being hovering at chest level in front of them contrasted the multihued decorations that framed her. Curled into a sleepy ball, she twitched her tail, one much longer than *Aedeeka's*, before unfolding into a stretching yawn. She flicked her rounded ears as her jaw closed, and blinking at the *feralae* in front of her, she cocked her head.

Eradnee lifted trembling arms. In increments, they cupped this being's body, keeping their hands a breath from her form, and at the sight, tears leapt into my eyes.

This was it. When they would fully understand what they'd become. I didn't want to watch it, didn't want to see the realization take place in their eyes, but I was helpless to close mine as my scion's fingers twitched, brushing against their *adraste's* outline.

Stiffening in place, Eradnee sighed, fluttering their eyes closed. As relief washed over them, I couldn't hold myself back anymore, try as I might. I flung my hands over my mouth, desperate to keep quiet, but still, a sob broke the serene stillness, and the *adraste* in our midst jerked toward me.

I spun away. Fate, I needed somewhere to hide. Maybe the washroom?

Eradnee should have this moment to themselves, untouched by all the grief and guilt I was bringing to the table. Much as the realization of their new life would surely pain them, it would also be a moment of peace. One of return to who they'd been. A break in the hell that was ordered time forced onto someone once free of it.

My scion didn't seem to agree with me.

"Serinius?" they whispered at my back. "Where are you going?"

There had been such hope in that one question. It broke my heart to answer it, but still, I did, burying all that I was feeling as I moved to the couch.

I didn't look at my scion until I'd sat beside them. Only then did I face them, and once I had, I had to lean away.

Because Eradnee's *adraste* was creeping toward me, lifting her nose in a curious fashion, and before I could get away, therefore freeing my scion of another complication, the misty being placed one delicate paw on my leg.

No.

In the apartment, the moment had turned thick and heavy, or it had for me. I wasn't sure how Eradnee was experiencing it. They had their eyes pinned on that white appendage, pressed into my dark leggings, and I didn't know what to do.

Too much emotion had swamped me in the last few minutes. It was all soup: a stone in my gut and a fist in my throat and acid in my eyes, and I didn't know the name for it all. I just knew that it was too much. There was too much *feeling* in one body, and I could not leak it out.

So, I focused on propriety. On expectations. On duty.

On Eradnee.

They lifted their gaze to mine, but I was already leaning forward. My fingers gently pressed into their temples and I brushed my lips over the top of their head, and they released a shaky breath.

"Beloved," they murmured.

I couldn't return that word to them. I wasn't sure why I'd said it after their ascension, when they'd been so proud and yet ruined. It certainly wasn't something I associated with them. Not 'now'.

But Eradnee wasn't in the 'now'. With their *adraste* summoned, they were in the 'all'. In the 'then' and 'now' and 'soon to come'. In this moment, I was everything I would ever be to them, and that meant I was beloved.

Which was what they needed. It was what they deserved, especially from me and every way I had and would destroy them.

So, as we tumbled to the floor and my skin collided with theirs, this might be an act of love for my scion. For me, it was only a service. It was biology, chemistry, and compatibility, coming together to create a reaction that left both of our thoughts scattered.

And in that moment, Eradnee's *adraste* filtered back into their core. The pain of this was covered by the rapture they were experiencing, something I barely noted through my own haze. They slumped against my chest, weak and limp, but again, this was to be expected.

It didn't matter whether our coupling had been to their satisfaction or not. After both that and everything their *adraste* had forced them to feel, their body had had enough.

Eradnee quickly drifted into sleep. I waited for as long as I could before replacing my body with a pillow beneath their head. After dressing, I strode to a com.

Liaison Veshtra's face was projected against a wall within a few heartbeats. Considering the annoyed look I was receiving and the late hour, I could only assume I'd interrupted their rest, but fortunately, they didn't make a fuss. They only inclined their head for me to speak.

"It's happened," I said. "I'll begin their training in the morning."

Veshtra nodded before vanishing, and it was done. The shattered Sage had their broken scion, one step further along in their decommissioning.

One step closer to the end.